

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Vaetchanan)

Is there any comfort? It's been fifteen years and many of us have moved on, since that terrible summer of 2006 and the Second Lebanon War. But for the families whose loved ones never returned, it is like yesterday, and the heroes whose larger-than-life stories fill our hearts, still occupy empty chairs and shattered dreams, as if they had only just walked out the door.

*Such a hero was and is Michael Levin. Absolutely refusing to take no for an answer and determined to enlist in the IDF and fulfill his dream of becoming a paratrooper, he actually climbed in to the draft center through a second floor window to get his papers. (The enlistment officer told him he was sometimes responsible for ensuring draftees did not illegally get **out** of the army, but had never seen a recruit avoid the guards in order to get **in** to the army!)*

When the second Lebanon War broke out Michael was actually on a long awaited and well-earned leave in California with his family, which he immediately cut short; it was not in his nature to see his comrades go to battle while he stayed home....

Michael indeed fulfilled his dream as a paratrooper crossing the border into Lebanon to defend his beloved Israel; a battle from which he never returned. Thousands of Israelis from all over the country honored his sacrifice and hoped that it would serve as some small comfort to his family, honoring the boy who may have been a lone soldier, but died as the brother and son of us all.

Here we sit; fifteen years later; are there any real words of comfort left?

This Shabbat, also known as Shabbat Nachamu, we read the portion of *Va'Etchanan*, which is always read on the Shabbat after Tisha B'Av. Indeed, the Haftarah (prophetic portion) read this Shabbat begins with Yishayahu (Isaiah)'s famous words:

"Nachamu nachamu ami"; "Be comforted, so comforted, my people, says G-d..."

Giving this Shabbat its name: Shabbat of comfort.

Which makes the choice of the beginning of *Va'Etchanan* so interesting; Moshe, speaking with the entire Jewish people on the banks of the Jordan River in his farewell soliloquy, shares that he begged G-d to enter the land of Israel, but G-d did not heed his request, denying him entry in one of the most tragic vignettes in the entire Torah.

Why would a portion meant to be comforting to the Jewish people after the commemoration of the destruction of both temples (on Tisha B'Av, the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av) begin with a request denied? How can Moshe's sharing this tragic ending to his career be comforting?

There is a detail to this story noted by the Talmud which may perhaps provide us a fascinating insight not only regarding this question, but to the way in which Judaism deals with the pain of loss in general.

“Rabbi Simlai expounded: A person should always praise G-d before he prays (literally; before he is ‘mitpalel’). How do we know this? From Moshe who first praises G-d and only then entreats him to enter and see the land of Israel...” (Tractate Berachot 32a)

The verses referred to here form the beginning of our portion of Va’Etchanan (Deuteronomy 3:23-26): First Moshe praises G-d and only then prays that he might enter the land.

This actually raises a fascinating question: If Moshe was such a great Prophet, did he not know that G-d had ordained that he would not enter the land? And for that matter what was the nature of this prayer? It seems Moshe was trying to change G-d’s mind; but of course that would be ridiculous! In fact, this would seem to be one of the central difficulties regarding prayer in general: If we truly believe in G-d (Hashem)’s omnipotence, how can we constantly ask G-d for things which would seem to imply that we want G-d to change His mind? If someone is poor it must be because G-d has decided he should be poor, and G-d already knows whether this person will ever become wealthy so why do we pray for sustenance and bounty?

In fact the idea that we should ask G-d for the things we want is itself heretical; after all, G-d knows what we want even before we know what we want! So how could Moshe ask G-d to enter the land, knowing that G-d already knows the answer to the question? What is the purpose of such prayer?

The truth is, Jews do not believe in *prayer*; prayer is a Christian word which means to beg or entreat, implying we are nothing. Prayer would have us throw ourselves before the mercy of the court hoping that the great Judge will change the verdict, effectively changing His mind. But Hashem (G-d) does not change His mind; indeed G-d is as unchanging as He is all knowing.

The Hebrew word for prayer is ***tefillah*** which may have an entirely different meaning.

When Joseph comes to visit Yaakov on his deathbed (Genesis 48: 11) he says “Re’oh phanecha lo philalti”, which according to **Rashi** means ‘I never imagined (or wished) to see your face again’. (Thinking Joseph was dead, Yaakov explains he never imagined he would ever merit to see him again...) Thus the root *palel* (the same root as le’hitpalel’) means to wish or want....

Indeed, le’hitpalel which takes the reflexive form according to Rav Kook may mean to struggle with what we really want. We are not asking G-d to change; we are struggling with how **we** can change, which is what Jewish prayer is all about. What we want is really who we are, and Jewish prayer challenges us to struggle with what we really want.

What do we really want? Is what we want what we should want? Is it what we believe Hashem (G-d) really wants us to want?

In fact, where does what we want really come from? Why do some want to play guitar while others want to build bridges? It is difficult to imagine that all our wants and desires are simply the product of our environment. Truth be told much of how we came to want, whatever it is we want, is a mystery; it is a gift given us by Hashem. And our challenge, indeed the essence of Jewish prayer, known as *Tefillah*,

is to struggle to understand what we really want and what to do with it. And in so doing we connect with the true source of our *ratzon*, our deepest longings.

But often, we tend to forget that it all comes from G-d and that it is not about changing G-d's mind, but rather about changing ourselves. And as Rav Kook suggests in his *Ein Ayah* commentary on tractate *Berachot* (quoted in the introduction to his *Olat Ha'reiyah*), this is the essence of Rav Simlai's aforementioned idea: the reason one should always praise G-d before tefillah (Jewish prayer) is because once we are truly in awe of Hashem's greatness, we will realize how absurd it would be to imagine understanding, let alone changing, Hashem's mind.

The portion of *tefillah* we refer to as *Shevach* (praise) is all about filling ourselves with awe of the magnificence and endless greatness of Hashem; if we could really understand that Hashem is the source of all reality, we would be ready to understand that prayer cannot be about changing G-d, it must be about changing ourselves.

Indeed, there is a balance between the values of struggling to understand Hashem's world, while at the same time recognizing how limited our intelligence must be relative to the source of reality. There is a certain freedom in knowing we can never, will never understand how and why Hashem directs or planned the world. All we can hope for, is to take note of the world with all its wonder and all its challenges and hope to change ourselves, and perhaps a little bit of the world in the process....

Even Moshe, before he struggles with why he so longs to enter the land of Israel, given that he will not be allowed to do so, will first praise Hashem and remind himself of the awe of the reality of Hashem to ensure he will not fall into the trap of thinking that even he, the great Moshe, will ever fully understand the ways of G-d. And in a way, that is his greatest comfort.

Perhaps for us as well, this is the greatest comfort in a world after Tisha B'Av and all the requisite pain and tragedy that followed: the belief that even though we can never comprehend the ways of Hashem, that nonetheless there is a larger picture we can never understand, directed by Hashem who loves us enough to allow us, after two thousand years of dreaming to nonetheless come home to the land we love and lost so long ago....

And perhaps, in some small way, when thousands from across the religious and political spectrum came to honor Michael Levin's sacrifice on that afternoon fifteen years ago, it gave voice to what all of us truly want for all of us. And maybe that can remain as some small comfort.

We owe it to so many to search deep inside of ourselves for the good and pure things we all want to make this land and this world a better place; soon. That is the greatest comfort of all.

For any who might want to see a short yet powerful movie sharing the story of Michael Levin:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbEBUBJ4AbY>

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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